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Rievaulx Abbey: update on a long-term landscape conversation

Freya Horsfield, Durham University, Dept. of Archaeology, Research Postgraduate; and Director of the Rievaulx Landscapes Project

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Rievaulx Abbey, 2015

(by permission of Clarissa DiSantis Humphreys)

As the countdown begins to the 100th anniversary of national guardianship beginning at Rievaulx Abbey in 1917, collaborations are now underway to examine the surprisingly understudied archaeology of this heritage icon. Rievaulx Abbey has been a part of the North Yorkshire landscape for nearly 900 years. The name conjures images of the evocatively ruinous buildings at the heart of the former Cistercian monastery north of Helmsley. The abbey's history is more complex than that of its monastic phase, however, although it is this phase which is most well-known.

The abbey was founded in 1132 and became a key element of the Cistercian monastic order, a movement considered by Tobin to have been "one of the last great pan-European phenomena before the triumph of the nation state." Rievaulx Abbey was the first monastic house of the Cistercian order in the North of England.

The history of Rievaulx continued after the dissolution of the monastery in 1538, when the new owners pursued some practical activities begun by the monks, including metal working. A village grew up among the ruins of the abbey, and the ruins gradually became a fashionable tourist destination. The abbey ruins now attract thousands of visitors each year, and are now largely in the care of English Heritage. The presentation of the ruins forms an integral part of enabling people to step into England's story, and the site remains open while a new museum and visitor facilities are being developed. The abbey ruins inspired work by JMW Turner, and the view of the ruins from the neighbouring Duncombe Park estate were incorporated within one of the most notable 18th century designed landscapes in England. Rievaulx Terrace is now in the care of the National Trust.

Given Rievaulx Abbey's importance in terms of cultural heritage and as part of a still-active international religious tradition, modern archaeological attention paid to the site of the abbey and the landscape with which it was associated has been surprisingly limited. The abbey precinct was the area within which most of the medieval monks lived and undertook their religious duties. The precinct also encloses the focus of much archaeological work to date, with exceptions such as work carried out by Bradford University at some upland grange (farm) sites.



Rievaulx Abbey, 2015

(photos by permission of Clarissa DiSantis Humphreys)

- Rievaulx Abbey. Photo taken at the inaugural workshop of the Rievaulx Landscapes Project in February 2015
- Looking beyond the abbey: was Rievaulx really founded in a wilderness as the historic accounts suggest?

Land within the monastic precinct was one of the earliest sites taken into national guardianship at the end of World War I. The site was cleared by methods which modern archaeologists would regard as fairly rudimentary, and the results of this clearance were never fully published. The excavator (Sir Charles Peers) published only a small popular booklet, and the excavation records remain in box files in national archives awaiting attention.

Other 20th century archaeological work has been constrained by the technology and approaches available, and by the necessity to avoid intrusive investigation in the area scheduled as an ancient monument. As a result, there are still major unresolved questions, which centre on the monastic precinct.

Beyond the monastic precinct, Rievaulx Abbey had interests in land across the North of England, from the River Tees through to South and West Yorkshire. Its status in the Cistercian order also meant that it was involved in complex religious, social, cultural and economic networks extending across Europe. So far, the study of the relationships between Rievaulx, and the contemporary medieval socio-economic and physical landscapes, has been dominated by consideration of documentary evidence.

Modern archaeological investigation of Rievaulx Abbey and its associated landscapes has recently re-started. This is being facilitated by technology enabling non-intrusive survey of extensive areas of the surface and subsurface. Historic England has carried out a survey over the abbey precinct using overlapping and highly detailed imagery collected by flying drones, a technique called *Structure from Motion* (Historic England, forthcoming). Bradford University has re-established its long relationship with the abbey through carrying out preliminary geophysical investigations over an area just beyond the precinct.

Work begun at Birmingham University and now based at Durham University is examining landscape-scale water management reputedly carried out by the monks of Rievaulx. This research is focussing on two areas. On and around the monastic precinct, a 19th century theory about landscape water management known as the "*Rievaulx canals*" theory is still relied on to date and understand the precinct layout. This theory was developed by Canon John Atkinson, an ecclesiastical historian who compiled an edition of the abbey's historic documents, and a local surveyor, Henry Rye. Atkinson and Rye took references in the documents and interpreted these in light of physical features in the landscape around the abbey, then published their theory respectively in 1889 and 1900. Atkinson and Rye suggested that at the time of the abbey's construction the river Rye had run down the centre of the valley, and that the monks had significantly diverted the river in a series of major ditches and canalisations. This theory has remained highly influential, and is closely linked to current interpretations of the date and sequence of the precinct development.

In 2013-14 preliminary analysis by Birmingham University of light detection and ranging (LIDAR) data provided by the Environment Agency endorsed the reservations expressed by observant local mason John Weatherill and some archaeological field investigators about the practicality of aspects of the "Rievaulx canals" theory.

The second area being investigated by Durham University is within the Vale of Pickering. The Rievaulx monks are historically reputed to have reclaimed large areas of former marshland in the Vale, enabling them to raise large flocks of sheep; the proceeds from which helped sustain the monastery economically.

A further area associated with Rievaulx Abbey is being studied collaboratively between university-based researchers and volunteer citizen scientists from all walks of life. This blended research team is using the LIDAR data provided by the Environment Agency, and processed by Durham University, to study areas of upland north of the abbey, further developing methodologies initially devised for the Altogether Archaeology project in the North Pennines. The study area being examined by the blended research team includes the site of some of the earliest grants of land made to the abbey. These grants were made by Walter Espec, who also gave the land in the Rye valley on which the abbey itself was founded. The monks established several granges in this upland area, and some of the stone used to build the abbey was mined here. According to Bradford University research these upland granges also contained locations where some notable innovations in metalworking were possibly pioneered.

The website for the Rievaulx Landscapes Project <http://rievaulxlandscapes.org> contains more detail about work currently underway, and references to the researchers on whose work this summary is based.